

OBITUARY

DR G. A. NEIL HORTON 1915–2005

Dr Neil Horton, who famously discovered the Silurian moth *Eriopygodes imbecilla* (Fabr.), new to Britain, died on 29 August 2005, aged 89.

Neil was raised in Monmouthshire, attending Newport High School. In his book *Monmouthshire Lepidoptera*, published in 1994, he talks of searching in his youth for butterflies at Llantarnam and “The Plantations”, Croesyceiliog, (now the site of County Hall). He also had a great love of the Wye valley. His family had a long association with Redbrook in the Wye valley, where they ran the Redbrook Tinplate Co. (making the thinnest tinplate in the world!). The Angiddy Valley, above Tintern, was one of his favourite areas for entomology.

On completing his schooling, he went to Christ's College, Cambridge, where he obtained an MA degree. In addition to his medical qualifications, he studied for a degree in Botany and Zoology. After Cambridge and a period at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London he served as a doctor in the RAF in India, Burma and Ceylon.

Neil moved to Usk in the 1950s. In 1958 he moved within Usk to Plas Newydd where, running a light trap in his garden for 25 years, he accumulated a long list of first VC moth records (31 macros in all) and many county rarities. He also started trapping elsewhere in Monmouthshire and further afield, often in the company of his two great friends Dr John Bradley of the Commonwealth Institute of Entomology and Lieut.-Col. R.B. Humphreys. In addition to Lepidoptera he also recorded other insects, particularly Coleoptera, and was an excellent botanist. He was a frequent participant and visitor to various entomological societies' exhibitions and contributed several articles to entomological journals.

In 1968, Neil was invited by John Heath to be County Recorder and Referee for Monmouthshire butterflies and moths, a post he held for 27 years, but he is best remembered for the events of 1972. He was keen to investigate the upland moths of the north-west of the county, and on a fairly windy day (29 July) he looked at the



maps for sheltered sites and spotted an old disused quarry (Blaentillery Quarry) above Cwmtillery. The story goes that a car was parked in the quarry. Neil hammered on the window, telling the occupants that this is where he needed to put his trap. The occupants obviously thought he was a dangerous madman, and quickly acquiesced! A small, male, brown noctuid moth came to light which Neil did not recognise. It was subsequently identified by D.S. Fletcher of the British Museum of Natural History as *E. imbecilla*, a species new to Britain. Neil named it the Silurian after the previous human inhabitants of the area. It was confirmed as a British resident when further individuals were seen in 1976, and Neil used to tell many stories of how other entomologists tried to find the site. This year, 33 years after the first discovery, larvae of the Silurian moth have been found in the wild in Britain for the first time. It is sad that Neil died only four months later.

After retiring from practice as a GP in 1983, Neil moved to Llansoy where he had a magnificent view over east Monmouthshire and, still running a light trap, compiled another impressive species list for his new garden.

I first met Neil Horton in 1985. He and his wife, Sheila, were very kind with their hospitality and I thoroughly enjoyed the field trips with Neil, learning a lot about the best Monmouthshire sites. He also had an encyclopaedic knowledge about Monmouthshire in general. The slow onset of old age was evident though, and he became increasingly frustrated with his difficulty in seeing the detailed markings on specimens in the field and his decreasing dexterity in catching, handling and setting them. Eventually, about three years ago, his collection of Lepidoptera specimens was given to the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.

Ever since its formation in 1963 Neil had a close association with the Gwent Wildlife Trust. He wrote several articles for the newsletter and in 1974 used the Trust to publish a leaflet on the *Butterflies and Moths of Wentwood* which sold for the princely sum of 10 pence. Twenty years later, the Trust encouraged him to write a county guide to Lepidoptera and helped seek funding for the project. Much of the credit must go to the late and much-missed Patrick Humphreys, then President of the Gwent Wildlife Trust. Patrick's company, Comma International Biological Systems, was used to publish the book. Ever the perfectionist, Neil regretted two aspects of his book. The photographers assigned to produce plates of Neil's set specimens were more used to dealing with commercial advertisements than biological specimens. The first set of plates was scrapped and Neil was still unhappy with the second attempt, but lack of time and money meant they had to be used—hence the “shadows” on some of the specimens. He also committed the cardinal sin of missing a typesetting error which led to his wife's name being misspelt in the dedications! Then, soon after publication in 1994, the company producing the book went into liquidation and the stock of unsold books disappeared, though copies have resurfaced in second-hand bookshops at Hay-on-Wye and elsewhere.

Eleven years on, *Monmouthshire Lepidoptera* is still regarded as a bible by local lepidopterists and I feel sure Neil would be delighted if he knew how much his book has done to stimulate interest in, and recording of, local butterflies and moths. We owe him a lot and his contribution will not be forgotten.

Thanks are due to Neil's son, Steve Horton, for providing the photograph of Neil and some of the information.